Interview with Patrick Aguino

This interview took place on October 12th, 2025, at the home of Patrick Aguino, at the Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo in New Mexico.

Patrick Aguino, tribal leader and former governor of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo in New Mexico, and one of the few remaining fluent Tewa speakers, runs a language school to sustain his language and culture. As governor, he led major environmental restoration and co-stewardship initiatives that strengthened tribal sovereignty and regulatory control over water and environmental oversight. A prolific visual artist and dedicated steward of the desert Southwest—not far from the imagined terrain of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner—Mr. Aguino offered rich insights into making art in a time of grief and loss; his relationship to land, rocks, and humor as medicine; his thoughts on cartoons and pop culture; and the figure of Coyote as trickster. Throughout our conversation, themes of rock as embodied agent, art and place as identity, storytelling, fiction and imagination, familial and cultural caretaking, layers, strata, pressure, and time frequently surfaced in ways meaningful to my research.

Mr. Aguino's autobiography was published last year by my father. He opened our conversation by describing how he and my dad (Cliff) came to be friends, with a brief aside about an upcoming reality show he'll appear in, before we moved into the interview proper.

Patrick Aguino: I came across Cliff's email; he wanted to know if I knew of a quiet place that I could let him stay, since he was a writer; a place for him to write. That's how me and him became friends in 2021. Then after my turn as governor in 2021 and 2022, one of the guys picked to be a governor in 2023, told me about some

people who wanted to interview me. I agreed, and as it turns out, sometime next year, I'll be on a reality show.

Julie Jablonski: Wow, that says something about the impression you make.

PA: Yeah, that's what they said.

JJ: Well, thank you again Mr. Aguino, for your time and generosity and for reading my thesis idea. It is a privilege and honor. And happy birthday to your grandson. To begin, I was especially interested in speaking with you because of the way you bring together human experience, art, and humor. You're also a steward of the land where the Wile E. Coyote cartoons are set; their creator imagined them unfolding across New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. Given your ancestry and the environmental work you've done as governor, I deeply value your perspective on land. As a white person living on, and taking comfort from these rocks and land, I'm conscious that I'm on land I was never meant to call home, land stolen, potentially, by my own ancestors. To spend a year researching and speaking about how much these rock layers mean to me without acknowledging that truth would feel irresponsible. My roots and emotions here are complicated, and I'm trying to look at the whole picture honestly. With that said, I'd love to start by asking: when did you begin making artwork?

PA: Forever. Since we were little, we were playing with the ground, dirt, dirt paper. Sitting there on a dirt floor, just moving it. It was a nice surface to draw on. Sometimes you do your ABC's or your cursive writing with a finger. Sometimes with a stick. But there were a lot of imaginations that were being created and wiped off, and starting again. Today, you got the smart board. It was like that.

(He pointed to a photo) My father and my mother had twelve kids, eight of us that survived. And as I said in my book, the movie *Grease* could identify all my

siblings. My brother Juan would have been the tough guy. He got a degree in engineering, and he did a lot of art. The Ohkay Owingeh symbol, my brother designed it, having all the purple under one wing. My brother's art is very popular, he was good.

And my mother was into pottery making, and my father too. They knew their own style. The old style of making pottery with gourds; cutting the gourds in half and then forming the inside of the gourd. And I don't know what it's called; ‘a land formation’ of some sort. But you are talking about layers of land; there was…what do you call it…let me get a pencil (he then drew a picture). Some of the land formations that you see today going to Santa Fe, right?

JJ: Yeah, I took some photos of them yesterday.

PA: Yeah, if you go and look up at them, there's a white sand layer in them. It's like a belt. It's near Pojoaque. They call it shooyano (15:48). And *this* bothers me, (he pointed to a feature in his drawing) as to what it is. I mean, I know what *that* is. I don’t know what *this* is. Sometimes I think it's dinosaurs in my mind. Dinosaurs are breathing this stuff in and out and suddenly they lay on the dirt like they’re talking. That’s my own imagination, like how you are referencing imagination and cartoons.

It's called ‘runny nose.’ Why would they call it that? It doesn't make sense for it to be that.

Julie: Is that Tewa?

PA: Yeah, that's Tewa. So, they would dig up the shuyang then they mix it with a clay mud. The clay that's here on the land, just on the other side of the road. In the old days, when we were growing up, there weren’t many cars or vehicles. You'd probably have to come there in a corber to dig some shuyang out and take it back to the Pueblo. At that point, my mother would mix the clay and then step or walk on it, or whatever they do. She would mix her clay, then from her clay that's mixed with the shobeyan, she would make the pottery. So that was her and my dad.

Next, I have my sister, who I characterize from the book as a beautician. She was totally into the cat eyes, purple or yellow hair or whatever. She ran a beauty shop, but her talent was in embroidering. She did a lot of embroidering.

And then after her, there was my brother Frank, who I characterized in my book as a jock, the baseball player, letter jacket and all that. I love my brother Frank. He's talented in his own way.

When I talk about talent that my brothers have, my brother Juan was talented and was also rich from selling it. My brother, Frank would also sell his art once in a while.

And then my sister Josephine; I named her as the head of the Pink Ladies. She was very pretty. She worked at Head Start for a lot of years. After that, is my brother Diego, who the teachers constantly nagged at me about why I could not be like him. This total schoolboy. He was the bookworm, the smart guy. He finished from University of Colorado, Boulder, in anthropology. I think anthropology might be good, but then anthropology is also awakening a lot of…shaking a lot of bones. My

father would say sometimes it's not right to be moving that stuff. Diego was very smart and very, very, talented.

And then my sister, Pauline, who is awesomely, totally happy girl in *Grease*, singing and dancing. She's probably still singing somewhere. So, all that family, when you ask, “when did you start art, drawing, painting, whatever?” With that kind of family, you were *born* into it. It was the same with Jeremiah, my grandson. I'm not telling him how to draw. He has it. And my son would say, “I've always wondered why I had so much interest in art.” I said, well, now you know.–

JJ: It's in the blood.

PA: It’s in the blood. So, my father and my grandma, we had one window in the Pueblo like this (he pointed to one of his paintings). The table would be set in that window view. And that's where all the art was being created. My Pueblo home, in the village. That's where a lot of the things were made.

My father was also a storyteller. Which is why I tell stories today. I tell a lot of stories. But my father also told stories. Germans, French, different races came and found the Tewa people without a history book, without a written history. The Germans, the French decided to ask questions to our people. And my people told the story of how and what went on. And some of those stories that got dug up, my father was still telling those same stories in his house all these years later. And I think “wow,” because I remember these kinds of stories still today. I started teaching professionally in 2005.

JJ: With the Tewa Language School?

PA: With the Tewa Language. But I've been recording my culture since I was probably eighteen or twenty years old. I've been writing my own notes. I've been doing that for a long time. When I was a youngster, this man was alive (he pointed

to a portrait of a man and his father). This man was our neighbor. He was the last of the Ice Men, and he's my predecessor. I took his role, but I don't take his title because he died before he could give his title up. That's the culture I take care of.

And my father was the head of the medicine clan. That picture right there is my father. So throughout my years like Jeremiah, as a little boy, people would constantly come into our house. And my father was constantly in the back room with his door closed. And the rattle was constantly going, and the chanting was constantly going. And I would wake up to the chanting, and I would see a guard sitting inside my living room, like in the army, or the sergeant of arms. We have those in our tradition.

JJ: To protect him?

PA: Yeah, to protect me, too. In the days of my father, people were constantly here, and I was as old as Jeremiah, but the only difference between me and Jeremiah is that I knew the language. That was my first language. English is my secondary language. So the guard that was sitting in there, his first language was Tewa too. So when he would get up talk to my dad, they would talk about the directions and how things emerged from the directions. Whatever he said to the North, he said to the West. And what he said to the West, he said to the East, South and the North. And I would be standing there and think, “you already said that.” But it was his duty to say.

JJ: Right, but you're just a kid.

PA: Yeah, right. I'm a little kid. I’d say “I heard you say that to this direction already.” But I'm understanding the whole thing because I knew the language.

And then we have my uncle. That's my dad's brother (he pointed to another painting). He was a, what is it in English? They call it a clown. A jester. Yeah. If you

walk into a room, people start laughing. He didn't have to say anything. People just started laughing, waiting for what he was going to say. He was just the funny guy. So that's why we say that laughter and happiness are a medicine. It's part of the medicine. It's a cure. To make you happy, which is talking about your cartoons. We have that in our culture. We have the idea of humor as a medicine.

So I would go to my grandfather. My grandfather was on the other side. Ohkay Owingeh is one of the only Pueblos still running on its two-clan society of the original Emergence. God created the, what do you call it, the world. Then us. The same way that the Corn Ladies created the Emergence. This is just my idea of them (he showed me a painting he made of the Corn Ladies), and I made them pretty and cute, the way I like my girlfriends. But the original Corn Ladies are still under the lake that we go to, the heavens where we emerge. The Corn Ladies are our mothers that are in our Emergence.

So those were the stories. What I'm trying to say is that I had oral teaching, oral learning, but I also went and learned my secondary language, English. And when I learned my secondary English, I was behind my class by one year. But throughout my journey, a lot of people have come to my aid. No matter if I was a C student in English, my teachers would always pat me on the back and say, you're getting there. Just keep reading. So I just keep reading, I read a lot of books. In those books, I found my oral teachings coming alive through somebody else's words in writing. And I said, “wow, I thought it was only orally taught.” But apparently somewhere along the line, somebody recorded someone speaking Tewa and put it into a book. It just takes time to read books. time to find it.

JJ: Yeah, it's a different process in a book versus oral learning.

PA: Yeah. It's different. Orally, you just learn. And a lot of times, the guys that were very gifted, like, say, my grandfather and my father; they were like me. My father's very open to friendship. He taught me how not to be afraid of a stage.

JJ: Oh, so you're not shy.

PA: I'm not shy. He taught me how not to be afraid by telling me to just experience. Be open to the world (tie to Josh's view of living life openly, Eli/Marcus lean into the discomfort). If I see a hundred people waiting for me to come in, I get my rattle and I go. Bring the spirits in. Bring the spirits in. Let those people feel what I feel.

And the guy singing (he pointed to a photograph), he was also my predecessor. And he told all my peers that I was his leader, that I was taking over as leader of his people. I'm just 18, 20 years old. By this time, the young kids, my peers, were not being taught; they didn't know Tewa. But we still needed them to be taught. We still needed to survive, to not let our culture die. We still need their presence.

He's pointing at me and he said I'm in charge. I'm here, all my peers are here and he's telling them to listen to me. And I'm saying, "wait a minute, wait a minute. You are the one that pulled me here. That means that *you're* in charge." He said, "no, I put you there and I say you're in charge because you know more of how to explain this to them than me."

He could do the *oral* teaching, he was totally awesome at that. He could make me *see* the butterflies, he could make me *see* the birds, he could make me *see* the sky, he could make me *see* the thunder…but in his *English*, he was not knowing what thunder was. He was not knowing how they say "the butterfly." He didn't know what they call a butterfly. So I've been doing that for a long time.

JJ: Do you have peers that are as fluent still in Tewa? Are you the most fluent at this point in time?

PA: I think at this point in time, I'm probably the most fluent of our tribe. I had a spiritual awakening. That day when he told me that I was in charge, I was a mere human being, but he told me that I was in charge and I need to tell him what's going on. I didn't know what to call it; “a spiritual awakening.” That's my English that's confused. I don't know what you call it, where it makes your eyes open?

JJ Yes, like an epiphany.

PA: What's it called? Give me that word (I wrote the word down on a piece of paper).

JJ: It might not be exactly right, but maybe in the realm of what you're getting at.

PA: Yeah, so instead of calling it a spiritual awakening, it's called an epiphany. (he showed me another painting he did) (add photo of this painting) Me and the guy driving the horse grew up together. The guy sitting in the back, we also grew up together. I'm the one that's sitting in the middle. And we went through a lot of ceremonies with the guy sitting in the back of me, he became totally awesome, very smart and he took care of my dad's role as a medicine man. He was also a medicine man. But my father was at home, as a home base for all the people that were sick. They knew that their doctor was home. But this guy, he took the doctor role to Washington D.C., he took it to political events. All over the world, he became known as a medicine man.

J:J Your father stayed here as the heart of the home, and your friend took it more globally? Out into the world?

PA: Yeah. And the rest of the world accepted him. He's one year and four days older than me. We're one-year-apart cousins. He passed. About two years ago.

JJ: And you've known him your whole life?

PA: I've known him all my life. We're both part of the culture. We're both part of this community. We're both part of this way we live, our people. I'm the head person of the Winter Site. I'm their leader of the Winter Site. In the old days, he was the leader of the Winter Site. He was the leader of the whole society.

We're there for each other, and we're there for the people. That's our culture, the way it is. I guess I'm just trying to tell you that we gotta think about how many years have passed by since the beginning of time. In the beginning of time, when they said this world was made out of two seasons, I was made out of a summer season and a winter season. That was when the creator created the Winter Man and the Summer Man. I'm just showing you that for hundreds of generations they brought new leaders; just like the pope. One pope dies, another one comes in.

JJ: Generations. It's just like the rock strata. Layers and layers and ancestry and history and lineage over time.

PA: Yeah. And maybe some are even different, your layers. Maybe some layers were not following the smooth path, some were more rocky. Sometimes smooth, sometimes rocky, you know?

JJ: Right, and sometimes there's a fissure.

PA: Yeah, sometimes a fissure.

PA: Yeah.

JJ: That we have to deal with.

PA: Yeah. All of that happens in life. But when creation happened, and they created the world—and in our Indian world, the Summer and the Winter—they also said that not one clan, not one Winter clan or Summer clan can prosper more than the other one.

JJ: It has to be balanced?

PA: It has to be balanced. So, for that reason the government would change; during the winter, the Winter Man would be the leader. During the summer, the Summer Man would be the leader. And then they would change. That went on for another 1,000 years, and then somewhere in the 1500s, the Spanish first came. Then in 1680, they had a Pueblo revolt. So roughly around 1680 or 1690, the government, the Queen of Spain, wanted the Pueblos to bestow a governor, and a lieutenant governor, and a second lieutenant governor, and a sheriff. So the Spanish are the ones that created the governor and the lieutenant governor, and the second lieutenant governor, and the sheriff. That's what the Spanish government created. But us, we already had created ours. The Spanish called ours 'the capitán de guerra.' And right away, they named our government the 'war chiefs;' the 'captains of the war.' And those were and are our government, but those are *our* rulers of our land—this land. And they have to change accordingly with the six Corn Maidens. Our government is made out of six ladies. There are kids in a spirit world where they're being made; and brought to earth. The child will belong to whichever side it falls on; the Summer Side or the Winter Side. Those kids that fell, they grew up, and now they became the leaders of our Pueblo. The same way for me; I fell. My grandfather is Summer Side. My mother is Summer Side. My father is Winter Side. But they took me to the Winter Kiva and raised me at the Winter Kiva.

JJ: So there are literally different areas on the Pueblo?

PA: Yeah. They're not literally different people. Not different clans. They're the same people. They have a different mother and a father.

JJ: There's still an idea that we're all one people?

PA: All one people.

JJ: Speaking of the layers you mentioned, do you see any metaphors in rocks? Do rocks give you any stories or are they a symbol for anything?

PA: It's all about culture, right? When the creation came— some of us became human, and some of us didn't. That's who we pray to. We pray to those that did *not* become human and those who are not human. It's like the rocks are symbols that govern your people. The rocks become guards and those rock guards have been found in every ancestral village, and probably even in modern day. Probably every tribe has a rock-guarded boundary.

And maybe along the line, the ancestors, the medicine man, asserted safety through prayers, meditation and acceptance with the rocks. And of course you know there's a lot of ruins. A lot of abandoned sites. They probably have their own guard in their own abandoned building.

We have a lot of about rocks. I think all Natives carry a fetish of some rock. I think you'll find 80% of Natives have some rock in their pocket at most times. I carry mine. Let me get something…this is my prayer bowl (from a back room he retrieved a large woven bowl with rocks arranged around the periphery, and the bowl was filled with a powder).

JJ: Is that sand or salt? What's the powder?

PA: Cornmeal. To feed them. They're all protectors. We feed them. And then they become our pets. Our protectors. And so if we're going somewhere, we're going to take it.

JJ: You carry one in your pocket?

PA: Yeah. Most days.

JJ: Do you pick different ones on a given day?

PA: Yeah. Sometimes just to make Jeremiah or Grandma feel better. People that come into my house that know I carry my predecessors' belongings; they come in here and get the cornmeal, and then they feed the rock with the cornmeal. They pay respect, and then they'll go over there and then they'll feed the rocks.

Anyway, we live here in the Pueblo. There was another village on the other side called Yungay. Yungay became the first capital of New Mexico. It's just on the other side of the river. But the whole Pueblo of Yungay is completely gone. Roughly around 1500, when Coronado came to explore, Yungi was still alive. Apparently, they dug the whole place out. I don't know where all the artifacts went. I don't know. Like I say in my stories, I grew up in the 50s. I was born in ‘54. Most of the stuff that I remember was in the 60s, but during the 60s it was still dark and we didn't have outside plumbing. We had to use the restroom outside. We had to bring in our own water. Traffic was one car every hour or two hours.

The only thing I can say is that I did not understand what my father's reasons were to teach me all this. I did not understand that, growing up. All that he taught me was gearing me up for the future. I did not know that. At that time, I took it for granted.

JJ: As we do as kids.

PA: Yeah. Everything that he taught me has turned around. He said this, he said this. He said everything. And now I know. Me and my father, we did a lot of woodworking together, which is what I became, a carpenter.

JJ: Thinking across your father’s life, your life, the lives of your ancestors, for the future, what are you most concerned about and what are you most hopeful about?

PA: I'm concerned about the language. I'm concerned about the language. It's just, the Tewa language is so...one word, one sound means hundreds of things. It's

complex. Hard to teach because we don't have words for a sibling, a brother. Their only structure is older and younger. In my house, in my family, we talk to each other with our Indian name. Call to you to eat dinner with your Indian name or something.

JJ: Are you making strides? In talking to my dad, and doing research, it sounds like you're making strides with the language.

PA: I'm making strides, but I still don't see them at that oral place. I think they understand me. I mean, I think they understand me more than they can talk.

JJ: They can take it in and hear it and understand it more than they can say it?

PA: Yeah, as teachers, they're trying to teach without gesture. I don't know if that's right or wrong, but you want to say it without gesture.

JJ: Without the little cues, the little hints.

[At this point, he talked in depth about the death of his two daughters, one several years ago and one a few months ago. He talked about the layers of intergenerational trauma which has woven a web of loss through his life.]

PA: I'm going to go over there now. (he walked across the room and showed me a painting) All of this story, this is when we went to Chaco Canyon and we saw the horses like that.

JJ: Oh, yeah. I was going to ask about that. Chaco Canyon.

PA: Yeah, Chaco Canyon. I painted an eagle dancer in the top. Put the rainbow in there. This is from the deer hunting story of my dad and I. That's my daisy BB gun. And that's candy of that time, of the era when that was happening. The Coke cans were opened. (he then showed several more paintings) And this is a picture of my guardian with the elk. That's the Black Mesa back there. This is like a story of the Ice Man I told you about. My dad also told me the story of how the butterfly dance was created.

JJ: As for stories, you said that humor is medicine. Does your culture have any belief around the coyote as a trickster?

PA: Yes, humor is a medicine. I was telling your dad about the coyote. What is the name of your dad's publishing company...Desert Coyote?

JJ: yeah, Desert Coyote Press.

PA: I told your dad that in Tewa, to the Natives, the coyote, the trickster that you are talking about, is also characterized as very vulnerable or easily lied to, easily persuaded. He's very gullible. And he always wants to...he likes stuff. He can enjoy the melody of the ants singing or he can enjoy the birds singing. Just different animals that he can enjoy the bond of them being. When I say 'animals,' they're in their own clan. In our stories, the ants, for example, have their own basket.

They're like their own little tribe. But the coyotes listen to them. He can hear the ant's song. And he wants to imitate them, but he can't because his voice is too crackly. And then, of course, there's the fox that's smarter, where the coyote is more vulnerable.

JJ: So the coyote is a fool in a sense?

PA: Yeah, most of the time. That's what I was just telling Cliff; that the coyote is gullible. My father used to tell stories about that guy. About the fox and the coyote, the fox tricking the coyote into stealing the chickens out of the chicken coop. By that time, by my father's age, they in the Pueblo were already raising chickens, all of them. I'm talking about stories that are hundreds of years old. But during my father's age, he was still telling the stories. And he would say that the fox would trick the coyote into stealing from the chicken coop and telling him to go make some noise. When the farmer comes out, make some noise so he'll be looking to you and I'll get the chicken and then we can share it. So the coyote agrees, and he

makes a noise. Then the farmer comes out, starts chasing him. They're probably shooting at him. And the fox gets the chicken. And then later on the fox builds a fire and is roasting the chicken. And the coyote comes, and he says, “I'm so tired, I had to ran a long way.” And the fox says, “well, my friend, take a rest. I'm just starting to cook the chicken now. When you wake up, it’ll be ready.” So the fox tricks him again. The coyote will take a short nap and everything will be fine. So he falls asleep. While the coyote is sleeping, the fox is eating the chicken. Before he's through, he gets the grease from the chicken and puts it all over the coyote's mouth. Then later, when the coyote wakes up and gets hungry, he says, “what's that; chicken?” And the fox says, “well, you were just eating that. You ate it all.” “No, I didn't.” “Yeah, you did.” My father used to tell us stories in our own version of a cartoon. In our own version of a cartoon.

JJ: Yes. Like a mind cartoon. It's like ear cartoons.

PA: It's ear cartoons. Yeah, it was ear cartoons. And then he told us stories about… when you were young, you don't know it yet, but my father always had what he called the moral. Moral of the stories. My mind is playing these adventures. These are adventures from my dad's story, but I'm picking my own visual things that I've seen in my mind that I consider part of his life.

JJ: It is like telling your own cartoon, like building your own story from what you're hearing.

PA: Yeah. Just the same way with our Tewa songs. When we're singing Tewa songs, they're taking us to the North, to the West. I’m seeing it, the rain, the rain, everything coming. Yeah, imagination, seeing all that. So that's what my father did. So, a storyteller was telling his story, his *own* version, not necessarily what it said in the book. He's just making it up.

All this was my imagination. (he pointed to another painting) I painted this in 2017, but the story was from 1966, 1969.

JJ: You don't have reference photos?

PA: No.

JJ: All these are from your mind?

PA: Yeah, from my imagination. And these are from the river, I walked the river. And this is all my imagination, that deer up there. All my imagination. (he pointed to another painting) And this one, what do we call...you see it before it happens.

JJ: Oh, a premonition.

PA: This is a premonition. I drew that elk right there. The morning after I did this painting, I sat by the ditch, I was at the garden. A skunk came by. I had to put him in the story because he came by. And the yellow birds. And this is a Russian olive. But I painted the elk the day before I killed him. I had already put him in the painting. So that one was a premonition. A lot of my life has gone in a circle like that.